

# Whitney Museum of American Art 10

## The New American Filmmakers Series

EXHIBITIONS OF INDEPENDENT FILM AND VIDEO

### Warren Sonbert

#### Schedule

October 11-23

12:30 daily; Tuesdays at 12:30 and 4:00

*Carriage Trade*, 1971

October 11-16

Tuesday at 2:00 and 6:30; Wednesday-Sunday at 2:00 and 3:30

*Rude Awakening*, 1975; *A Woman's Touch*, 1983

October 18-23

Tuesday at 2:00 and 6:30; Wednesday-Sunday at 2:00 and 3:30

*Divided Loyalties*, 1978; *Noblesse Oblige*, 1981

Our perception of the projected film image is shaped by a number of factors in the production process. One of them, editing, constitutes a central strategy in filmmaking. The joining together of two or more sequences of film footage, editing gives the film its overall framework; it links the shifting points of view and compositions of different shots, and, in the process, structures the viewer's temporal perception of the film's action. It is Warren Sonbert's virtuoso use of editing and his exploration of linkage that is of special interest in his films.

This exhibition includes five of Sonbert's films. *Carriage Trade* (1971), *Rude Awakening* (1975), *Divided Loyalties* (1978), *Noblesse Oblige* (1981), and *A Woman's Touch* (1983) comprise a unique contribution to the art of film and to the genre of the diary film. With his camera Sonbert records impressions from his travels and daily life, capturing details of the world around him. This material is then



*Noblesse Oblige*, 1981.

October 11-23, 1983

Gallery Talk, Thursday, October 13, following the 2:00 screening. Warren Sonbert will be present.



*A Woman's Touch*, 1983.

refashioned as he edits the pieces of film into a coherent whole. It is in the editing process that the film footage is synthesized as the relationships between shots are developed. Sonbert creates a visual language out of discrete images, joining them into sequences by formal associations of light, color, composition, movement within the frame, and the moving camera. Place and time shift kaleidoscopically.

The art of Warren Sonbert translates the diary form into visual terms through the properties of the film medium. The recorded fragments of time and place become memories formed by the editing process into the reflexive discourse of the diary. The films give impressionistic views of a personal and public realm, ranging from his travels around the world in the program's first film, *Carriage Trade* (1971), to the shots of San Francisco, Washington, D.C., gay-rights demonstrations, traffic in the streets, clouds rolling over the mountains, and people in their houses in *Noblesse Oblige* (1981). In addition to the formal relationships between shots that produce the cascading flow of images, Sonbert's interpretative vision—his perception of place and of the timeless moment—is acute. Like a novelist who plays with the structure of the sentence and makes us aware of the varying shades of meaning of each word, sentence, and paragraph, Sonbert looks

through the surface meaning of the image, the literal recorded shot, to the linearity of time and the logic of sequence. He transforms our expectations of time and sequence through the pace of the action and the camera's point of view.

Warren Sonbert's diaristic films, together with the films of Jonas Mekas and Andrew Noren, define a significant genre within the American independent cinema. The portability of the hand-held 16mm camera provided the filmmaker with new access to the events occurring around him. The lightweight camera allowed Sonbert, for example, to shoot out of the window of an airplane taking him home from one of his journeys. As viewers we are carried silently around Sonbert's country and world, yet the recorded film image transcends the specificity of a moment in time and becomes part of an aesthetic whole, an interpretation and rendering of our world.

John G. Hanhardt  
Curator, Film and Video

#### Artist's Statement

These films are accumulations of evidence. The images must be read: not only what narrative connotations are given off by representational imagery as regards both language and figure-engaged activity, but also the constructive signposts of point of view, exposure, composition, color, directional pulls and the textural overlay. But in film the solo image is akin to an isolated chord; the kinetic thrust emerges with montage. That process expands, deflates, contradicts, reinforces or qualifies. It is this specific and directed placement that provides film with both its structure and its freedom.

Film can do flips, is acrobatic. A highly charged shot, though still potentially balanced by a multitude of suggestibles, may in turn, by replacement by a more neutral image, shift into objectivity the initial heightened response. This play with expectations, both frustrated and enhanced, constitutes a reason to look at the screen. The variables of an image, its visual qualities being punctuation, swell to a series of statements, whose provocative strains demand a measured vigilance of the viewer, when editing can either underline, comment upon or upset the fluctuating contiguities. This is not to say that the possible pleasure produced refuses rigor, but rather that cerebral sleight-of-hand implies control.

Warren Sonbert

#### Biography

Warren Sonbert was born in 1947 in New York. He studied filmmaking at New York University, where he received a B.A., *cum laude*, in 1969. He taught film at Bard College, Annandale-on-Hudson, New York, from 1973 to 1975, and at the San Francisco Art Institute from 1978 to 1979. Sonbert received a CAPS grant (Creative Artists Program Service, Inc.) in filmmaking from the New York State Council on the Arts in 1976. His films are in the collections of the Museum of Modern Art, New York; the Musée National d'Art Moderne, Centre National d'Art et de Culture Georges Pompidou, Paris; the Österreichisches Filmmuseum, Vienna; and the Arsenal, West Berlin. Warren Sonbert lives in San Francisco.

#### Selected One-Artist Exhibitions

Cineprobe, The Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1971; The New American Filmmakers Series, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, 1973; Collective for Living Cinema, New York, 1975; Cineprobe, The Museum of Modern Art, 1976; The New American Filmmakers Series, Whitney Museum of American Art, 1976; Österreichisches Filmmuseum, Vienna, 1976; The Art Institute of Chicago, 1977; Collective for Living Cinema, 1978; The New American Filmmakers Series, Whitney Museum of American Art, 1978; Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1979; University of California, Los Angeles, 1979; Cineprobe, The Museum of Modern Art, 1980; The New American Filmmakers Series, Whitney Museum of American Art, 1980; Collective for Living Cinema, 1981; The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, 1981; The Arsenal, West Berlin, 1982; Collective for Living Cinema, 1982; Münchner Stadtmuseum, Munich, 1982; Cineprobe, The Museum of Modern Art, 1983.

#### Selected Group Exhibitions

National Film Archive, London, "First International Experimental Film Festival," 1970, and "Second International Experimental Film Festival," 1973; Filmex, Los Angeles, 1974; Vancouver Art Gallery, "Vancouver Film Festival," 1974; Musée National d'Art Moderne, Centre National d'Art et de Culture Georges Pompidou, Paris, "First International Film Exhibition," 1976; Berlin Film Festival, 1977; Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, 1979 Biennial Exhibition; Moderna Museet, Stockholm, "New American Cinema," 1980; Holland Film Festival, Amsterdam, 1982; Mill Valley Film Festival, Mill Valley, California, 1982; Whitney Museum of American Art, 1983 Biennial Exhibition.

#### Filmography

All films are 16mm and color, unless otherwise noted.

*Amphetamine*, 1966. Black and white, sound; 10 minutes.

*Where Did Our Love Go?*, 1966. Sound; 15 minutes.

*Hall of Mirrors*, 1966. Sound; 7 minutes.

*The Tenth Legion*, 1967. Sound; 30 minutes.

*Truth Serum*, 1967. Sound; 10 minutes.

*The Bad and the Beautiful*, 1967. Sound; 35 minutes.

*Connection*, 1967. Sound; 15 minutes.

*Ted & Jessica*, 1967. Sound; 7 minutes.

*Holiday*, 1968. Sound; 15 minutes.

*Carriage Trade*, 1971. Silent; 61 minutes. (Includes footage from *The Tenth Legion*, *Truth Serum*, *The Bad and the Beautiful*, *Connection*, *Ted & Jessica*, and *Holiday*.)

*Rude Awakening*, 1975. Silent; 36 minutes.

*Divided Loyalties*, 1978. Silent; 22 minutes.

*Noblesse Oblige*, 1981. Silent; 25 minutes.

*A Woman's Touch*, 1983. Silent; 22 minutes.

Warren Sonbert's films are distributed by the Film-makers' Cooperative, New York.

#### Selected Bibliography

Carroll, Noel. "Causation, the Ampliation of Movement and Avant-Garde Film." *Millennium Film Journal*, Fall-Winter 1981-82, pp. 61-82.

Curtis, David. *Experimental Cinema*. New York: Delta Books, 1971, pp. 70, 71, 172.

Davidson, David. "Warren Sonbert's *Noblesse Oblige*." *Millennium Film Journal*, Fall-Winter 1982-83, pp. 109-11.

Mekas, Jonas. *Movie Journal*. New York: Collier Books, 1972, pp. 258, 326, 369, 404-5.

Sitney, P. Adams. *Visionary Film: The American Avant-Garde, 1943-1978*. 2nd ed. New York: Oxford University Press, 1979, p. 360.

Stoller, James. "Shooting Up." In *The New American Cinema*, edited by Gregory Battcock. New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., 1967, pp. 180-85.

#### Whitney Museum of American Art

945 Madison Avenue, New York, New York 10021

Hours: Tuesday 11:00-8:00

Wednesday-Saturday 11:00-6:00

Sunday 12:00-6:00

Film and video information: (212) 570-0537